

Reinterpreting Absorption: A Critical Examination of a Trend in Buddhist Studies

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In my view,
personal experience of meditation techniques
should not be allowed to determine
interpretation of [Buddhist] doctrine ...
(Bucknell 2022: 252).

Abstract

The present article problematizes a trend current among some scholars in Buddhist studies to view descriptions of absorptions (*jhāna/dhyāna*) in the early Buddhist discourses as reflecting substantially different experiences compared to corresponding descriptions in later exegesis. Closer inspection suggests that this trend originates from unreliable research.

Introduction

In a monograph published posthumously, Cousins (2022: 34f) offers the following assessment:

It is probably fair to say that the majority opinion these days ... is one that rejects the traditional Theravāda Buddhist understanding of *jhāna*. For these scholars *jhāna*, or at least the first *jhāna*, is a type of thinking that is characterized by the presence of joy and happiness and is free from the hindrances, but is not otherwise radically different from ordinary consciousness ... Perhaps they conceive it as rather like the state of mind when a scholar intensively explores some abstract question.

As he notes, this majority opinion does not square particularly well with the actual textual evidence. In addition, it implicitly “claims that the whole later Indian Buddhist tradition has misunderstood the basics of its own meditation tradition” (p. 35), which he understandably considers a problematic assumption.

In what follows I intend to examine in particular how this trend appears to have gained traction. My exploration begins by briefly taking up the contested question of absorption attainment as a meditative ‘experience,’ followed by a closer look at two publications that appear to have played a central role in the trend under discussion: Stuart-Fox

(1989) and Bucknell (1993). Then I turn to the apparent repercussions of their presentations and investigate what appears to have motivated the proposed reinterpretation.

Absorption as a Meditative ‘Experience’

The starting point of my exploration is a position taken by Sharf (1995: 261), as part of an extended argument presenting the privileging of meditative ‘experience’ as a predominantly twentieth-century development and proposing that technical terminology referring to specific meditative states tends to reflect legitimation strategies related to polemic and ideological concerns:

the designation of particular practices and the proper identification of meditative states that supposedly result from such practices are the subjects of continued and acrimonious debate ... In fact, there are serious discrepancies in the prescriptive accounts themselves: the description of the first *jhāna*, for example, differs depending on whether one turns to the *Nikāya* accounts, the *Abhidhamma*, or Buddhaghosa. This alone should give pause to those who would read canonical formulations as ostensive descriptions of meditative states.

This then leads Sharf (1995: 265) to the conclusion that “the Buddhist rhetoric of meditative experience would appear to be both informed by, and wielded in, the interests of legitimation, authority, and power.” In reply, Meyers (2012: 261) reasons:

I agree with Sharf’s general thesis that we ought to avoid the uncritical assumption that meditative experience necessarily plays a central role in the production of the various artifacts of Buddhist thought and culture, including discourse purportedly about meditation. I also endorse Sharf’s critique of the practice of using the category of experience to protect religion from objective or empirical scrutiny. But I do not agree that lack of consensus regarding descriptions of meditative states like the *jhāna*-s or the fact that Buddhist meditation terminology is used in a variety of polemical and ideological contexts entails that this terminology does not refer to specific kinds of experiences. I believe it is reasonable to suppose that the meaning of terms like *jhāna* is constituted *both* in reference to particular kinds of experiences available to those who endeavor to cultivate them and by the various discursive contexts in which these terms are deployed.

The significance of meditative ‘experience’ also emerges in the research by Schmithausen (1973), who marshals textual evidence in support of the impression of an influence of concentrative meditative experiences on Buddhist doctrines,¹ in particular in relation to the emergence of

Yogācāra idealism. In reply to criticism by Sharf (1995: 237f) and others, he successfully defends (and refines) his position in Schmithausen (2014: 597–641).

Regarding the general thesis of a supposed privileging of meditative ‘experience’ emerging in the course of the twentieth century, Bhikkhūnī Dhammadinnā (2021: 126f) surveys relevant early Buddhist texts, leading her to the conclusion that “the emphasis on ‘inner experience’ is not a product of modern reform movements, as it can be detected in essential gnoseological terminology and notions emic to early Buddhist thought.”

Without going so far as to attempt to present a comprehensive survey of critical replies to Sharf (1995), the above suffices for the present context to show that the proposed conclusions are not compelling even if descriptions of absorptions should indeed exhibit substantial differences. It remains to be seen, however, how far this is the case.

Apparently in support of his assessment, in a note appended to the statement quoted above regarding different descriptions of *jhāna*, Sharf (1995: 275n54) refers to five scholarly publications. One of these does not seem to be directly relevant, whereas another two actually take the opposite position.² This leaves two out of the five: Stuart-Fox (1989) and Bucknell (1993). In what follows, I critically examine these two publications, titled respectively “Jhāna and Buddhist Scholasticism” (Stuart-Fox 1989) and “Reinterpreting the Jhānas” (Bucknell 1993).

‘Jhāna and Buddhist Scholasticism’

In the former of these two contributions, Stuart-Fox (1989: 79) introduces his study by noting that “in certain cases, textual descriptions contain what appear to be outright contradictions. The tendency has been for believers and scholars alike to attempt to explain away such discrepancies,” adding that often there is “an exaggerated and uncritical respect both for the texts and for those who compiled them, together with a reluctance to question their accuracy.” Although taking a critical position is certainly praiseworthy, introducing it in this way does to some extent prime the reader to agree with the author’s problematizations, as by failing to do so one risks being uncritical. In other words, one risks being branded an “apologist,” a term used by Stuart-Fox (1989: 100) to characterize traditional positions that do not concord with his problematizations. Another issue is that disproportionally emphasizing such a critical stance

can impair the quality of research by preventing serious consideration of publications advocating the perspective of tradition and by introducing a bias in favor of excessive problematization.

This potential issue can be illustrated with the example of a level of concentration that lies between what in the standard descriptions found in the discourses are the first and the second absorptions, a mental condition in which *vitakka/vitarka* (“thought” or “application”) has gone into abeyance but *vicāra* (“sustaining”) still persists. These two are characteristic of the first absorption but both absent from the second. The Pāli *Abhidhamma* tradition considers the absence of the former but presence of the latter as a distinct level of absorption, the second of its fivefold scheme, as a result of which the third, fourth, and fifth absorption in this scheme correspond to the second, third, and fourth absorption respectively in the standard fourfold listing found in the discourses. Two works of the Pāli *Abhidhamma* collection, the *Vibhaṅga* and the *Dhammasaṅgani*, differ in their qualification of the joy and happiness experienced at this level of concentration: according to the former, such joy and happiness is “born of seclusion” (the term used in the standard pericope of the first absorption), whereas according to the latter, the joy and happiness experienced is rather “born of concentration” (the term used in the standard pericope of the second absorption).³

As pointed out by Bhikkhu Gunaratana (1985/1996: 104), arguments can be made in support of both positions. The difference is in fact somewhat negligible and only arises because the discourses just mention this particular level of concentration, without giving it a detailed description on a par with the standard pericope depictions of the four absorptions. Being more deeply concentrated than the first absorption but not yet as concentrated as the second absorption, the joy and happiness experienced at this stage of concentration has something in common with both qualifications used in the standard listing for the first and second absorptions respectively. Such joy and happiness is at the very least “born of seclusion,” but one may opt for considering it to be already “born of concentration.”

Even though he is aware of the discussion by Bhikkhu Gunaratana, according to Stuart-Fox (1989: 87) this difference rather “suggests, at the very least, that the monastic compilers were in disagreement not only over how the interpolated *jhāna* ought to be characterized, but also over how it should be attained.” However, proceeding from the first absorption to attaining this level of concentration just requires leaving behind *vitakka/vitarka*. The question of how best to qualify the joy

and happiness that results from leaving *vitakka/vitarka* behind has no direct bearing on “how it should be attained.” The quality of the joy and happiness experienced depend on what happens in the mind during meditation. The terminology used to describe that is hardly decisive for gaining the actual attainment.

Another example concerns a passage in the *Kathāvatthu*, another member of the Pāli *Abhidhamma* collection, which surveys topics debated among adherents of different Buddhist traditions. Stuart-Fox (1989: 101) comments on the relevant passage: “It appears that by this time the *jhānas* had for some monks become no more than another ‘point of controversy’.” In other words, here as well he sees evidence for a lack of actual meditation practice.

His reasoning is based on the following assessment of the relevant *Kathāvatthu* passage: “the ‘Theravadins’ are said to argue, against adherents of other schools, that *no* intervening stage exists between first and second *jhānas* in the *Sutta* account,” which he then contrasts to the already-mentioned recognition in Pāli *Abhidhamma* texts of a level of absorption between what in the discourses are the first and the second absorption. This assessment seems to rest on a misunderstanding, as the point of contention is a different one. The position taken up for discussion is whether one can proceed directly from one absorption to the next.⁴ The denial of such a direct meditative progression promoted in the *Kathāvatthu* has no direct bearing on the Pāli *Abhidhamma* position regarding a level of absorption without *vitakka/vitarka* but still with *vicāra*, situated between the first and the second absorptions (according to the standard account in the discourses).

Here, too, the situation could have been clarified by consulting Bhikkhu Gunaratana (1985/1996: 81 and 101), who explains that the Pāli exegetical tradition considers each absorption to have a distinct access to it—this being the issue at stake in the *Kathāvatthu* discussion—and that progress through the fivefold Pāli *Abhidhamma* scheme of absorptions simply involves an intermediate step between what are the first and second absorptions according to the reckoning of the discourses. This intermediate step then has its own distinct access, which leads to leaving behind only *vitakka/vitarka* but not yet *vicāra*.

To my mind these two examples illustrate that, although there is definitely a need to beware of a tendency to explain away discrepancies, there is also a need to beware of a tendency to indulge in excessive problematizing. A

penchant toward problematization does not on its own lead beyond the confines of opinionated views, simply because it is itself informed by a particular view that tends to emphasize discontinuities and ruptures, at the expense of acknowledging continuities. This is not in any way to intimate that being critical is not commendable, but only to propose that an attitude of skeptical disbelief is preferably not confined to the ideas and reasoning of others but also applied to our own. Expressed in Buddhist terms, this could be articulated as an attempt to adopt a middle path position of balance that neither minimizes nor exaggerates variations found in the texts, in the understanding that research is at its best when avoiding both of these two extremes.

In the present case, the tendency to point to a lack of actual experience in meditation practice appears to be influenced by the final conclusions to be drawn, rather than reflecting what the texts related to these two examples convey. According to these final conclusions in Stuart-Fox (1989: 101 and 103), the supposed change in descriptions of the first absorption “resulted from scholastic elaboration rather than constituting a phenomenologically accurate reporting of an attained meditative state,” a change attributable to “scholars and exegetes who elaborated scholastic discussions of the path while lacking acquaintance with the higher stages of meditative practice.”

The conclusion that such a change took place in turn relies on two main arguments. These concern two positions taken in Pāli *Abhidhamma* texts, namely that unification of the mind is a quality of the first absorption, and the already-mentioned recognition of a stage of concentration without *vitakka/vitarka* but with *vicāra*. Stuart-Fox (1989: 88f and 92) admits that it is conceivable that in the former case “the *Abhidhamma* description is merely the formalization of an alternative earlier, canonically supported description,” and in the latter case “it might be suggested that ... the *Abhidhamma* fivefold listing merely formalizes earlier distinctions between *vitakka* and *vicāra* drawn in the *Sutta-piṭaka*.” He rejects both possibilities, however, as according to his assessment all relevant references in Pāli discourses are not supported by their parallels and for this reason can be set aside as late.

Closer examination shows that this assessment is not correct: For the case of the presence of unification of the mind in the first absorption, two instances are supported by discourses preserved in Chinese and Tibetan.⁵ For the case of concentration without *vitakka/vitarka* but with *vicāra*, three instances extant in Chinese and in a partially preserved Sanskrit

fragment offer support.⁶ It follows, in line with his own reasoning, that in both cases the *Abhidhamma* texts indeed just formalized what is already found in the discourses. This finding decisively undermines his conclusions.⁷

Besides, in Anālayo (2017: 109–150) I studied central issues related to descriptions of absorption in the early discourses, which has already put into perspective much of what Stuart-Fox (1989) considers problematic. Taken together, this much suffices to consider his conclusions to be in need of revision. Before being able to proceed further, however, I need to survey other relevant publications by the same author, by way of contextualization.

The position taken by Stuart-Fox (1989) regarding the supposedly substantial differences between accounts of absorption in early and later texts, apparently his sole contribution as a single author to the area of scholarly studies in Buddhist meditation,⁸ seems to be a more detailed presentation of an opinion already presented briefly in Bucknell and Stuart-Fox (1986: 176f). The two authors have been close friends since the time of being university students and regularly met to exchange ideas.⁹ In his preface to their jointly-published monograph (Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: xi), Stuart-Fox explains that right from the outset he had been “immediately impressed” by the ideas originally developed by Bucknell alone, and he had also been able to “verify to my own satisfaction some of his meditation techniques.” The last reference appears to concern the practice of “retracing” thoughts, to which I will turn in the last part of my exploration. For much of the time of their collaboration on this book, Stuart-Fox mainly “acted as a critical sounding board” (Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: xi). It was thus only with the third and final draft of the book manuscript that he took a more active role by contributing topics based on his own research. These topics are not covered in Stuart-Fox (1989),¹⁰ which gives the impression that the main ideas in this article would have originated from his exchanges with Bucknell.

The two have also collaborated on another four articles, three of which concern topics covered also in their joint monograph but published previously to its appearance in print (Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1980, 1983a, 1983b); the fourth offers a reply to a review of their book (Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1989). The jointly-produced monograph refers to the article eventually published alone by Stuart-Fox (1989) as “forthcoming,”¹¹ conveying the impression that by the time the manuscript of the book went to press, this article had also been completed. In other words, its

compilation must belong to the same period of collaborative activity between the two authors that led to another three articles and the book, all of which appropriately published under the name of both.

In the article under discussion, Stuart-Fox (1989: 105n1) acknowledges “Bucknell’s valuable criticism of successive drafts of this paper.” This shows that, in addition to presumably providing the basic ideas, the latter was also involved in refining their articulation. This finds confirmation in relation to an error in Stuart-Fox (1989: 92f), which I had pointed out in Anālayo (2014b: 83n43). In an acknowledgement of this error, Bucknell (2019: 405n30) recognizes sharing responsibility for it, referring to his own role in relation to the writing of this article as “myself as his consultant at the time in question.”

In sum, the upshot of the above survey of publication activities and references is simply that Stuart-Fox (1989) is not an independent articulation of the proposed claim. Even though for whatever reason it has been published under his name only, it should be seen as substantially influenced by Bucknell, both in terms of content as well as formulation. It thus seems that joint authorship, comparable to the procedure adopted for their book and the other articles, would probably have reflected the situation more accurately.

‘Reinterpreting the *Jhānas*’

The other of the two articles appropriately quoted by Sharf (1995: 275n54) is Bucknell (1993), which is the second of altogether four scholarly publications he has contributed as a single author that involve taking the position that the first absorption in the early textual sources should be understood to intend a state in which thinking continues, distinct from the position in the Pāli *Abhidhamma* and commentaries.¹² His take on the matter thus appears to be the most prominent voice in advocating this interpretation in the academic field.

In the article under discussion, Bucknell (1993: 375) begins by praising critical studies of the absorptions in Buddhist meditation theory and then identifies those that he considers particularly relevant to his concerns: “Two such studies, those of Griffiths (1983) and Stuart-Fox (1989), have drawn attention to one problem in particular that is demonstrably crucial in any attempt to understand the *jhāna* series. It has to do with the composition of the first *jhāna*.” When proceeding from a survey of the standard account of the absorptions in the discourses to the

corresponding account given in the central path manual *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa, Bucknell (1993: 386) again refers to these two studies: “The task of sorting out the relationship between these two accounts, and discovering how the differences may have come about, has already been tackled in a preliminary way by Griffiths and Stuart-Fox.”

These two references to Griffiths (1983) are to some extent unexpected, as the position taken in this article does not involve the type of problematization promoted by Stuart-Fox (1989). Regarding the supposedly crucial difference between accounts of the first absorption in the discourses and in later exegesis, Griffiths (1983: 67n15) takes the following position: “Although most commentarial analyses of the first *jhāna* attribute one-pointedness to it—as also do many places in the *Nikāya*, as at MN 3.25–27, partially reproduced on p. 6—it is not explicitly mentioned in the stereotyped pericope.”¹³

This is thus not the position taken by Stuart-Fox (1989). Instead of proposing that these are substantially different accounts or trying to discover how the differences have come about, to all appearances Griffiths (1983) treats the absence of a reference to unification of the mind (or “one-pointedness”) as merely a textual variation. In his presentation, it only features as a peculiarity of the pericope that unification of the mind is not explicitly mentioned. It follows that the presentation in Griffiths (1983) takes a different position compared to the one promoted by Stuart-Fox (1989). In other words, there is only a single ‘critical’ study that provides a precedent for the position taken in Bucknell (1993), and this study is to all appearances strongly influenced by the latter’s ideas.

A central concern by Bucknell (1993: 390) is the question: “How does Buddhaghosa’s description, with its detailed series of sub-stages, relate to the much simpler *Nikāya* account of the *jhānas*?” In order to answer this question, he presents a subjective account of experiences during the cultivation of concentration, which he then relates to the account in the Pāli discourses, noting variations compared to the account given in the *Visuddhimagga*. From the viewpoint of methodology this is far from straightforward, as it makes a subjective account the basis for comparing and then evaluating the two textual schemes. It would have been preferable to compare these two directly.

Based on this not unproblematic approach, Bucknell (1993: 394–402) then maps out supposed correspondences for what he refers to as the “eight *jhānas*,” that is, the four absorptions and the four formless or

immaterial “spheres” (*āyatana*). Bucknell (1993: 394) proposes to consider the experience of “goose-flesh,” taken from his subjective account, as corresponding to the *pīti/prīti* (“joy” or “rapture”) mentioned in the standard descriptions as being present in the (first and) second absorption,¹⁴ with the cessation of the experience of goose-flesh and related phenomena consequently corresponding to “the transition from *jhāna* 2 to *jhāna* 3.” In support of correlating the experience of goose-flesh to *pīti/prīti*, Bucknell (1993: 394n33) quotes the following indication from Mahāsi Sayādaw (1971/1991: 28): “There arises also in him rapture [*pīti*], causing ‘goose-flesh’, falling of tears,” etc.¹⁵ The context for this statement is an exposition of the so-called “corruptions of insight” (*vipassanupakkilesā*), and the sentence previous to the quote indicates that the phenomena described occur “as a result of insight.” In other words, rather than being a characteristic of absorption attainment, this is about a potential obstacle that can occur during the progress of insight, which in the commentarial literature that informs the Mahāsi approach features as substantially different from the cultivation of tranquility aimed at mundane absorption attainment.

In the same note, Bucknell (1993: 394n33) also refers to the *Visuddhimagga*, the relevant part of which gives a survey of five different types of *pīti/prīti*.¹⁶ The hair-raising type of *pīti/prīti* features as the first and lowest of these five types, and only the highest and fifth type of *pīti/prīti* concerns absorption.¹⁷ It follows that the account by Buddhaghosa distinguishes between the *pīti/prīti* that results in the mere manifestation of goose-flesh and the much more elevated and intense *pīti/prīti* of actual absorption attainment. In this way, neither of the two references adduced in support of the identification of goose-flesh with *pīti/prīti* concerns absorption attainment.

Bucknell (1993: 395) also proposes that a shift from a material object as the basis for cultivating concentration to its counterpart mental image corresponds to the transition from the fine-material (*rūpa*) to the immaterial (*arūpa*): “the arising of the mental replica of the meditation object would mark the transition from *jhāna* 4 (the last *rūpa-jhāna*) to *jhāna* 5 (the first *arūpa-jhāna*).” A problem with this proposal is that the term *rūpa* in its usage in the discourses can refer to meditative visions of form. An example in case is a Pāli discourse titled *Upakkilesa-sutta*, which in agreement with a Chinese parallel and a partial Tibetan parallel refers to meditative “vision of forms” (*dassanañ ca rūpānaṃ*/見色/*gzugs mthong ba*) experienced during the cultivation of concentration previous

to the successful attainment of the first absorption.¹⁸ This precludes relating mental images experienced in meditation to the term *arūpa/arūpya*, which instead stands for the absence of any mental images.

The commentarial account of the cultivation of such a mental image during the deepening of concentration involves a progression from the “acquired sign” (*uggaha-nimitta*) to the “counterpart sign” (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*).¹⁹ Bucknell (1993: 400) correlates these two to the first two immaterial spheres. Yet, these two stages in the cultivation of the mental image are part of a meditative trajectory that involves a deepening of the experience of *pīti/prīti*, rather than occurring only after *pīti/prīti* has been left behind, which characterizes the third and fourth absorption as well as the four immaterial spheres. This confirms that the goose-flesh phenomenon, which in the subjective meditation report occurs before the arising of the mental image, does not correspond to the *pīti/prīti* experienced in absorption, thereby in turn further undermining the proposed correlations for the four levels of absorption. Moreover, in the commentarial scheme these two stages of the mental image are based on a circumscribed object, and it is only subsequently that this mental object will be extended so as to become all-embracing.²⁰ This prevents relating these two stages, concerned with a limited object, to the two immaterial spheres of *infinite* space and *infinite* consciousness described in the discourses, which by definition are without any limit whatsoever.

The culmination point of the series then comes, according to Bucknell (1993: 401), when with “the eighth and final stage the meditator becomes totally unconscious.” This supposedly corresponds to the fourth immaterial sphere as described in the discourses. The cultivation of a mental condition of being unconscious does not correspond to a stage in the account in the *Visuddhimagga*. A condition of being unconscious also does not correspond to descriptions in the discourses of the fourth immaterial sphere, the sphere of neither-perception-nor-nonperception. A Pāli discourse, the *Pañcattaya-sutta*, and its Tibetan parallel report that ancient Indian advocates of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-nonperception as their final goal took care to distinguish their approach from just being unconscious, considered by them to be merely a state of delusion.²¹ The condition of being unconscious thus has no relationship to either of the two textual schemes of the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres; it derives entirely from the subjective account that Bucknell (1993) uses as the basis for comparing them, confirming the methodologically questionable nature of the adopted approach.

Bucknell (1993: 394) commends his conclusions by reasoning that “one has to be prepared to put aside long-held notions about the nature of the *jhānas*,” which holds in particular given that their supposed concentrative depth “has already been rendered dubious,” a remark that must be intending the conclusions proposed by Stuart-Fox (1989).²² This then “means that both scholars and meditators now have to be ready to re-think the entire *jhāna* series. In such an enterprise intellectual flexibility is naturally essential.”

The overall conclusion reached by Bucknell (1993: 403) through such “intellectual flexibility,” based on proposing correlations that are clearly untenable, is a radical reinterpretation of absorption attainment: What in the *Visuddhimagga* features as the development of concentration leading up to the first absorption corresponds to the full range of the attainment of all absorptions and immaterial spheres in the early discourses:

What Buddhaghosa portrays as steps on the way to the first *jhāna* ... are in fact steps on the way to the last *jhāna* [=fourth immaterial sphere]. It is now evident that Buddhaghosa’s account is not, as generally supposed, merely a more detailed and precise formulation of the account found throughout the Nikāyas. Rather, it is a fundamentally *different* version which is in serious conflict with the Nikāya account. By Buddhaghosa’s day the *jhāna* doctrine had been drastically modified.

In this way, the supposed contrast between ‘*sutta-jhāna*’ and ‘*Visuddhimagga-jhāna*’ appears to have received its academic credentials.²³

Repercussions of the Reinterpretation

In what follows I briefly pursue the repercussions of the reinterpretation of absorption attainment surveyed above. Stuart-Fox (1989) and Bucknell (1993), as two presentations that are not particularly reliable, have set the scene for Sharf (1995) to take the hypothesis as established fact on which to build for further conclusions, with inattentive quoting contributing to the gradual morphing of two interdependent authors into five authors appearing to be in support of the proposed conclusion.

Sharf (1995) is not the only one to trust the reinterpretation of the absorptions too easily. In the introduction to a monograph based on her PhD research, Arbel (2017: 9) approvingly quotes the above-quoted conclusion by Bucknell (1993: 403), reasoning that “Bucknell’s main argument seems valid.” Presumably based on this assessment, she then argues that in early Buddhist thought the absorptions were actually states of insight. Arbel (2017: 6) explains:

What this study does challenge, however, is the assumption that Theravāda commentarial literature refers to the same *jhānas* as the Nikāyas ... what will be suggested here is that what the Nikāyas call *jhānas* seems to be different type of experiences; experiences that are the fruit of insight ... what I am suggesting is that ... these two textual corpuses—the Nikāyas and the Theravāda commentarial tradition—might be talking about two different types of experiences brought about by two different types of practices.

In this way, by this stage in the reception of the reinterpretation of absorption, the gap between the Pāli discourses and the commentaries widens further, as the difference between them concerns not only depth of concentration. By now, even their role in the Buddhist scheme of liberation has come to be seen as substantially different. Closer inspection shows that this proposal suffers from a number of misunderstandings, combined with overlooking conflicting evidence.²⁴ This unfortunately makes Arbel's conclusions just as unreliable as those proposed by Bucknell. At the same time, however, her presentation clearly shows the degree to which the reinterpretation of absorption attainment has gained traction in the field.

The above complements another trajectory apparently also of considerable influence in promoting a reinterpretation of absorption attainment (Anālayo 2022a: 172–197 and 207–209). This other trajectory seems to have its starting point in criticisms voiced against the method of insight meditation taught by Mahāsi Sayādaw, arguing for the supposed indispensability of absorption abilities for reaching stream-entry. In a dexterous move in reply, Mahāsi Sayādaw identified stages of insight as a form of absorption, referred to as '*vipassanā-jhāna*' ("insight-absorption"). This appears to have successfully silenced his opponents who, due to rejecting his form of practice, lacked personal experience of its stages that could have enabled them to question this identification. At the same time, however, it set a precedent for reinterpreting the term '*jhāna*' to stand for meditative experiences quite different from the type of absorption described in the discourses, even though Mahāsi Sayādaw himself clearly kept these two usages apart.

In fact, besides its success in the academic field, the trajectory of reinterpreting absorption in Buddhist Studies also appears to have substantially influenced Buddhist practitioners. This can be illustrated with quotes from books by two contemporary meditation teachers, which I already took up in my previous study of the trajectory related to Mahāsi

Sayādaw. The two books come with endorsements by leading Western meditation teachers with practical experience of the Mahāsi Sayādaw tradition, such as Joseph Goldstein (both books), Jack Kornfield, Gil Fronsdal, and Christopher Titmuss, reflecting the degree to which the presentations in these two books are apparently considered acceptable.

According to Shankman (2008: 101), the first of these two meditation teachers: “The *Visuddhimagga* presents a path of meditation and the states within it that is new and distinct from the Pāli suttas.” As a result, “the understanding of *jhāna* evolved from being a state of undistracted awareness ... to states of extreme tranquillity in which the mind is utterly engrossed in the mental qualities of the *jhāna* itself.” The second meditation teacher, Brasington (2015: 165 and 167), reasons: “By the time of the *Visuddhimagga*, some eight hundred plus years after the Buddha’s death, the *jhānas* had become redefined to such an extent that it was extremely difficult to learn them.” In turn, “[t]he sutta *jhānas*, which far more people could attain and use, fell into disfavor and were mostly forgotten.”

Such an impact on meditation practitioners is quite in keeping with the explicitly stated aims of the authors of the two articles surveyed above. Stuart-Fox (1989: 105 and 94) takes his own study to show how “scholarly study may explicate stages in the Buddhist path to enlightenment of practical benefit to modern day meditators,” reasoning that “[i]t should be possible, therefore, for present-day practitioners of meditation ... to attain similar elementary concentrated states, and thereby test the accuracy of the textual descriptions” of the reinterpreted absorptions. In the same vein, Bucknell (1993: 405) reasons that the proposed “revised understanding of the *jhānas* should, therefore, give encouragement to practicing meditators. The path of concentration practice is not nearly as long and arduous as Buddhaghosa made it seem.”

Background to the Reinterpretation

A relationship between the two trajectories mentioned above emerges with the latest publication by Bucknell (2022: 251–263), a monograph that contains not only his most recent advocacy of the interpretation that the first absorption is a state in which the flow of thinking continues but also an account of his personal meditation experiences. These have their starting point in his participation in a six-week intensive course in the Mahāsi Sayādaw tradition.

Such participation could easily have led to an exposure to the idea of *vipassanā-jhāna* promoted by Mahāsi Sayādaw, even just in the form of a brief remark made in passing by the teacher under whose guidance he was meditating, to the effect that the term *jhāna* is applicable to a state of mind engaged in the cultivation of insight. Such an exposure could have served as a seed initiating a process of reflection and reconsideration that eventually led Bucknell to advocate a reinterpretation of the nature of absorption.

Be that as it may, continuing to practice subsequently on his own, on one occasion he tried to find out in what way a particular distraction had arisen, in the sense of “retracing” the chain of thoughts and associations that had led the mind away from its meditation object and into the state of distraction. Finding this a rewarding approach, Bucknell (2022: 256) decided to continue in the same way with other distractions: “Eventually I found myself retracing every thought sequence initiated by loss of concentration. As this became routine procedure, I decided to formalize it by including it as part of my meditation practice.”

Reflecting on the practice he had developed in this way, Bucknell (2022: 258) then came to the realization that “recollection of former existences ... bore a distinct resemblance to the retracing of thought sequences that I was practicing.” A reinterpretation of the notion of “birth” (*jāti*) by Ajahn Buddhadasa then became the basis for Bucknell (2022: 259) to arrive at the conclusion that the two can indeed be identified with each other, provided descriptions of recollection of past lives are read symbolically. This, to him, “came as a revelation.” In other words, “the meditative technique applied by the Buddha to achieve insight was the practice of retracing,” and “the stereotype descriptions of the three knowledges in texts like the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta* implicitly refer to this technique.”²⁵

The proposed practice of retracing thoughts can best be evaluated from the viewpoint of the meditation technique which it purportedly improves. From the viewpoint of meditation practice as taught by Mahāsi Sayādaw, a problem with such retracing of thoughts, whenever a distraction occurs, is that pursuing past associations is contrary to the main meditative task of cultivating continuity in present-moment awareness. Mahāsi Sayādaw (2016: 79) quotes from another path manual, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the indication that pursuing the past is related to the hindrance of restlessness,²⁶ followed by offering this comment in his *Manual of Insight*:

Things that one has previously seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched, or thought about are called objects of the past ... When the mind wanders back to the past in this way, we say that the mind is restless, and this creates an obstacle to insight concentration. Therefore, every time this restless mind has been noted, the mind should be placed again on an object in the present. This means that one must note only objects that arise from moment to moment. In connection with insight meditation, this means the present object.

In other words, though retracing may perhaps be revealing if done once, so as to come to see directly the absurd associations the mind can call up, doing it regularly runs counter to the main thrust of the practice taught by Mahāsi Sayādaw, as it involves an intentional departure from being in the present moment.

The problem of repeated retracing could be illustrated with a simile in the discourses that describes the nature of the wandering mind with the example of a monkey roaming in a forest by taking hold of one branch after another.²⁷ Seeing this behavior of the monkey once is enough to understand it; there is no need to keep trying to identify what exact branches the monkey has taken hold of in order to arrive at the place where it is now. The same holds for retracing the details of past associations. What needs to be understood is the principle of how association works, rather than spending valuable meditation time in retracing all the details of each instance of distraction.

In an introduction to insight meditation in the tradition of Mahāsi Sayādaw, Kornfield (1977/193: 52) explains that, based on establishing “awareness of the moment-to-moment change of body and mind,” the technique of mental noting “helps the yogi keep from identifying or getting involved with the content of different experiences. Mahasi emphasizes that awareness should focus on direct experience each moment and that mental notes are simply a peripheral help” for that. By showing the merely instrumental purpose of the employment of concepts, this assessment highlights another problem with the practice of retracing, as its undertaking implies getting ever more involved with thoughts.²⁸

Turning to the symbolic interpretation of birth proposed by Ajahn Buddhādāsa, this has to some extent a precedent already in important exegetical works. The *Vibhaṅga*, a comparatively early member of the Pāli Abhidhamma collection (already mentioned earlier in my

exploration), and the **Mahāvibhāṣā*, an important treatise of the Sarvāstivāda traditions, agree in applying the whole set of twelve links of dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda/pratītya samutpāda*) to a single mind-moment.²⁹ It follows that the link of birth (*jāti*) here indeed stands for the arising of a mind-moment. At the same time, however, this mode of interpretation does not deny that in other contexts birth (*jāti*) stands for actual rebirth. In fact, it is not applied to recollection of past lives. Bucknell and Stuart-Fox (1983b: 106) note that the same holds for the interpretation proposed by Ajahn Buddhādāsa, as when “formulating his re-statement of the rebirth doctrine, Buddhādāsa appears not to have considered its implications for the doctrine of the three knowledges.”

In taking the step to propose that the first higher knowledge of recollection of past lives corresponds to the meditation technique of retracing, Bucknell and Stuart-Fox (1983b: 107f) argue that a precedent can be found in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, a central exegetical manual in the Sarvāstivāda traditions. According to their assessment, “Vasubandhu’s account of the first [higher] knowledge implicitly equates it with the meditative technique of retracing.” This then supposedly serves to corroborate the proposed interpretation of recollection of past lives.

Now, the introduction to the passage in question states that such recollection, just as any of the five higher knowledges, takes place based on absorption attainment, which the two authors have repeatedly emphasized involves states of deep concentration in exegetical literature. This is thus quite different from taking a distracted state of mind as the starting point. Moreover, the actual practice requires proceeding ever further into the past, from the state of mind that has just disappeared all the way to the time of conception in one’s mother’s womb.³⁰ This is thus not concerned with repeatedly following various chains of associations but much rather intends a single linear progression ever further into the past. Besides, the practice described in this way is not yet recollection of past lives; it is only the preparatory practice. Actual recollection of past lives only begins once the practitioner proceeds into the past beyond the moment of conception. This is of course outside of the purview of retracing one’s associations. It follows that Vasubandhu’s description of recollection of past lives is not an instance of the meditation technique of retracing as developed and described by Bucknell.

Regarding the indication in early and later textual sources that the standard description of recollection of past lives takes place after the attainment of the fourth absorption, Bucknell (2022: 238) reasons that,

since such practice “implies sequences of mental images,” it follows that “the meditator first returns from *jhāna* 4 to a state resembling *jhāna* 1 ... [i]n short, the flow of thought is allowed to resume.” This relates to his way of conceiving the nature of the first absorption, which Bucknell (1993: 397) describes as corresponding to “the normal flow of thought, the stream of imagery and verbalizing which, like a television program that is rarely switched off, provides a persistent though vague and unobtrusive background to our everyday waking consciousness.” What marks this as corresponding to the first absorption is that this flow of thought should just fulfil the condition explicitly stipulated in the standard description of remaining free from sensuality and unwholesome states.

The conception of the first absorption as a state in which retracing could be practiced seems to feature as a key element of the belief that this meditation technique corresponds to what the early discourses report the Buddha did in the night of his awakening. Understandably, retracing is not just equated to the reinterpreted first absorption in general, as this would arouse problems, since Buddhist sources generally consider the first absorption as not in itself liberative and requiring the additional input of insight. Instead, it is identified with the more specific instance of the reinterpreted first absorption employed for the purpose of recollecting past lives as a higher knowledge leading onward to awakening.

Bucknell and Stuart-Fox (1983b: 108) then present a further development of retracing by way of the “technique of observing the linking process between successive thoughts” as equivalent to the second higher knowledge, the divine eye, with the help of which the practitioner observes the passing away and rebirth of sentient beings in accordance with their karma. The problem that the standard accounts of the two higher knowledges do not naturally evoke such meditation practices finds a solution in the proposal by Stuart-Fox (1989: 110n95) that “knowledge of how to practice the higher meditative techniques became confined to an esoteric transmission in early Buddhism.” This proposal takes care of the lack of textual support for the practice of retracing, since, as noted in a more detailed discussion of this proposal in Bucknell and Stuart-Fox (1983a: 3), “an esoteric transmission is, by its nature, unlikely to leave any historical trace.” On closer inspection, the proposition of an esoteric transmission turns out to be as unreliable as their other proposals, discussed above.³¹ In a critical review of their book, Jackson (1988: 129) offers the following overall assessment:

if meditation is to be a tool of Buddhist studies, I fear that it must be used with greater care than by the present authors.

The experiential sample from which they are drawing never is made entirely clear, and they are rather indiscriminate in their comparisons of these experiences with those of others, citing with approbation anyone, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, who appears to share their ideas, and ignoring or explaining away accounts that seem to differ. Thus, the fivefold scheme of insight meditation that they discover comes to exercise a kind of determinative tyranny over the book, shaping all textual readings, all historical analysis ... Bucknell and Stuart-Fox are not careful enough to separate explanation from interpretation or history from ‘theology.’

The observation that the “experiential sample from which they are drawing never is made entirely clear” reflects the fact that only the personal account published in Bucknell (2022: 251–263) has finally revealed the promoted meditation technique to be a form of practice developed by Bucknell himself, based on his personal experiences. These stand in the background of the proposed identification between retracing and the first higher knowledge (as well as between “linking” and the second higher knowledge), and at the same time inform the belief in the importance of thinking for progress in meditation. Taken together, this identification and the status accorded to thinking appear to be central influences behind the position taken in his various articles in support of the position that the first absorption in the early textual sources should be understood to intend a state in which thinking continues, distinct from the position in later exegesis.³²

The impact of this conviction can be seen, for example, in the recurrent problematization of a level of concentration in which *vitakka/vitarka* has been left behind but *vicāra* continues. According to the renderings used by Bucknell (1993: 378) in his translation of the first absorption, these two factors of the first absorption are “initial thought (*vitakka*)” and “sustained thought (*vicāra*).” A problem here is how to make sense of the idea of sustaining thinking without initiating it. In other words, the recognition of a level of concentration that is without *vitakka/vitarka* but with *vicāra* does not square particularly well with the idea that these two stand for “the normal flow of thought ... like a television program that is rarely switched off” (Bucknell 1993: 397). The recognition of the existence of such a level of concentration already in the discourses would require a different interpretation of the practical significance of these two mental factors, which would no longer correspond to the envisaged nature of the first absorption.

Even more challenging is the qualification of the first absorption as involving unification of the mind, which Bucknell (2022: 206) therefore considers “to serve a polemic function,” adding in a note that it could have provided “a means of persuading monks to accept the otherwise questionable notion that *vitakka-vicāra* is a state of deep concentration” (Bucknell 2022: 206n25). A Pāli discourse that, together with relevant Chinese and Tibetan descriptions, explicitly mentions the presence of unification of the mind in the first absorption has for this reason to be rejected as late, with Bucknell (2022: 208) stating that “the discourse in question does not date from early Buddhism. It dates rather from centuries later.” The basis for this assessment appears to be mainly the need to authenticate the practice of retracing thought rather than being a reflection of the actual textual evidence.³³ This attempt at authentication appears to be the central driving force behind the promoted reinterpretation of absorption, with all its significant repercussions.

The conclusion I am proposing here is not meant to promote a monocausal explanation of the trajectory leading to a reinterpretation of absorption. The arising of trends and opinions is necessarily a complex issue, impacted by a range of causes and conditions. Nevertheless, within such a causal network, central influences can be discerned. Thus, without intending to turn a blind eye to other contributory factors, it does seem reasonable to propose that the two interdependent publications by Stuart-Fox (1989) and Bucknell (1993) had a central influence on the spread of the reinterpretation of absorption in academia, and that a central force shaping the position taken in these two publications would have been an attempt to validate a somewhat idiosyncratic style of meditation developed by the latter. The apparent genesis of the reinterpretation of absorption in subjective meditation experiences and the concomitantly felt need for their authentication shows that, despite a tendency at times to overstate his case, Sharf (1995) has a point in trying to warn about legitimization strategies that can emerge in relation to meditation experiences.

Conclusions

Arguments by Stuart-Fox (1989) and Bucknell (1993) in support of a reinterpretation of absorption do not stand closer scrutiny; the same holds for the proposed correlation of the exegetical description of stages leading up to the first absorption with the full range of the four absorptions and the four immaterial spheres in the early discourses. These findings deprive the supposedly substantial difference between conceptions of absorptions in early Buddhist discourse and later exegesis of its alleged support in textual evidence.

Besides the disconcerting employment of academic research in an apparent attempt to authenticate “personal experience of meditation techniques,” the central trajectory in the genesis of “the majority opinion these days” also offers an object lesson in how research that is in several respects quite unreliable can gain wide acceptance through reliance on the rhetoric of critical skepticism toward traditional teachings.³⁴ Perhaps the present case could serve as an encouragement to maintain a critical attitude even in relation to scholarly publications that rely on such a rhetoric.

Abbreviations

Abhidh-k	<i>Abhidharmakośabhāṣya</i>
AN	<i>Aṅguttara-nikāya</i>
D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
Dhs	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
Kv	<i>Kathāvatthu</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
P	Peking edition
Paṭis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
SĀ	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SHT	Sanskriethandschriften aus den Turfanfunden
SN	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
T	Taishō edition (digital)
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Uv	<i>Udānavarga</i>
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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Notes

- 1 A shortened English version can be found in Schmithausen 1976.
- 2 In support of his position, Sharf 1995: 275n54 refers to “Bucknell 1991,” which appears to be just a typo as his list of references (p. 278) gives the date of the only publication by Bucknell listed as “1993.” Other publications mentioned in the same note by Sharf 1995: 275n54 are Bronkhorst 1986, Cousins 1973, Griffiths 1983, and Stuart-Fox 1989. However, Bronkhorst 1986, at least in the revised and expanded version published in 1993/2000 that is available to me, is not directly relevant, as he does not take a position on descriptions of the first absorption differing substantially between “*Nikāya* accounts, the *Abhidhamma*, or *Buddhaghosa*.” A comment relevant to this topic in Griffiths 1983: 67n15 takes the opposite position, as he suggests that the commentarial attribution of unification of the mind to the first absorption is in line with indications found elsewhere among Pāli discourses. Cousins 1973: 124 argues that the listing of five absorptions in the *Abhidhamma* involves only a terminological difference, derived from taking into account a variant listing already found in several discourses. This of course implies that this mode of presentation does *not* amount to a “serious discrepancy.” Another publication that could have been mentioned in support of the proposed position is Rahula 1962, which apparently has so far largely gone unnoticed.
- 3 Vibh 264,21: *vivekajaṃ pītisukhaṃ* and Dhs 33,28: *samādhijaṃ pītisukhaṃ*.
- 4 The introductory query in Kv XVIII.6 in Kv 565,30 is: *jhānā jhānaṃ saṅkamaṭī ti?*
- 5 The first case is MN 43 at MN I 294,31, supported by MĀ 210 at T I 788c20 and Up 1005 at D 4094 *ju* 8a2 or P 5595 *tu* 8b8 (which are strictly speaking parallels to MN 44), and the second case is MN 122 at MN III 111,20, supported by MĀ 191 at T I 738b25 and a Tibetan version edited in Skilling 1994: 206,3; mentioned in Anālayo 2014b: 78n24 and Anālayo 2019: 2347 respectively.
- 6 The first case is DN 33 at DN III 219,18, supported by Sanskrit fragment K 484 Vc in Stache-Rosen 1968: 23 and 88 (although being only partially preserved, the full text can be reconstructed based on a quotation in the *Saṅgūtiparyāya*, T 1536 at T XXVI 389b4), the second case is MN 128 at MN III 162,14, supported by MĀ 72 at T I 538c3, and the third case is AN 8.63 at AN IV 300,5, supported by MĀ 76 at T I 543c20; all three cases are mentioned in Anālayo 2014b: 83n42+43.
- 7 In regard to MN 43 as one of two cases where a Pāli discourse reference to unification of the mind as a quality of the first absorption is supported by non-Pāli versions, Bucknell 2019: 406–413 criticizes my discussion in Anālayo 2014b: 78n24 for having failed to mention that the reference to unification of the mind in the listing of the factors of the first absorption is preceded by the standard pericope description of the first absorption, which does not mention unification of the mind. He considers the resultant situation to reflect two different understandings of the first absorption, which conflict with each other. Now, the article in question is, as explicitly indicated in the title, “a study of source material from the *Madhyama-āgama*.” Even though at times I may have mentioned the Pāli version first in a footnote, simply because most readers will be more familiar with that, my basic approach was by way of comparative study of parallel versions from different textual lineages, with an emphasis on relevant passages from the *Madhyama-āgama* extant in Chinese. The relevant discourse MĀ 210 at T I 788c19 and its Tibetan parallel, Up 1005 at D 4094 *ju* 8a1 or P 5595 *tu* 8b7 (which are strictly speaking parallels to MN 44), do not have the standard pericope description of the first absorption. Instead, they just list the factors of the first absorption, including unification of the mind. From a comparative perspective, the occurrence of the standard pericope in MN 43 is thus quite possibly a later addition. Notably, Bucknell 2019: 406n32 is aware of this difference for the first of these two parallels but has chosen to ignore it: “Being incomplete in this respect, MA 210 is excluded from the following analysis.” This is contrary to the basic procedure of comparative study, which requires taking such a significant difference into account, rather than setting it aside. The same problem recurs with the Tibetan version, of whose existence he must have been aware, as this is explicitly and repeatedly mentioned in

Anālayo 2011: 272 (referenced in Bucknell 2019: 407n34). Yet, he does not even mention the existence of this third parallel. This is not an isolated instance of this type of procedure, as in his latest contribution, Bucknell 2022, he fails to mention any of the relevant Tibetan parallels. If language barriers prevent consultation, at least the existence of such parallels needs to be mentioned, information on which is readily available in Honjō 1984 or else in Chung 2008 (SĀ) and Chung and Fukita 2011 (MĀ). Returning to MN 43, even just taking the Pāli version at face value, its presentation need not be taken to imply two different conceptions of the first absorption. Consideration of the context shows that the immediately preceding topic in MN 43 at MN I 294,¹⁶ adopts the same procedure by first asking a rather basic question, in this case regarding *bhava*, which elicits the standard listing of three types of *bhava* in response. This then leads on to a deeper inquiry regarding what is responsible for generating renewal of *bhava* in the future and what prevents it. Obviously, this exchange concerns the same types of *bhava* just mentioned previously. This goes to show that there is nothing intrinsically problematic in this type of procedure for a question-and-answer exchange, and there is no firm basis for considering it to be an exclusive feature of Abhidharmic analysis. In fact, the idea that the question-and-answer format is necessarily proto-Abhidharma is unconvincing; see in general Anālayo 2014a: 27f and more specifically in relation to MN 43 Anālayo 2022b: 26n10. The same basic pattern evident in the exchange on *bhava* then holds for the ensuing discussion of the first absorption: To set the stage, MN 43 at MN I 294,²⁴ first has the rather basic question regarding the first absorption, which elicits the standard pericope. This then leads on to a deeper inquiry regarding its salient qualities, the reply to which takes the form of the listing that contains a reference to unification of the mind. Here, too, the ensuing inquiry obviously intends the same first absorption that has just been introduced with the standard pericope. There is no real basis for seeing a contradiction here, as I already noted in the very footnote that has come up for criticism, Anālayo 2014: 78n24: “It would be a misunderstanding of the purpose of these descriptions to assume that the first absorption is without unification of the mind because this is not explicitly mentioned, just as it would be mistaken to conclude that the first and the second absorption are without mindfulness just because mindfulness is only mentioned in the standard description of the third and fourth absorptions.” This is the central issue that would need to be addressed in a critical reply, as it concerns the central premise on which Bucknell 2019 relies.

- 8 Bucknell 2019: 392 comments that Stuart-Fox “is not so well known for his contribution to the study of Buddhist meditation theory,” followed by referring to “his one published article in that area, ‘*Jhāna* and Buddhist Scholasticism,’ dated 1989.”
- 9 See Bucknell 2022: xv (acknowledgements by Bucknell) and 265 (postscript by Stuart-Fox).
- 10 Stuart-Fox in Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: xii explains that, besides providing critical feedback: “my most important contribution has been to develop the argument concerning the role of magico-symbolic macrocosm-microcosm parallelism.” This topic is not taken up in Stuart-Fox 1989.
- 11 Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: 204n11.
- 12 Bucknell 1989: 136 and 142, Bucknell 1993: 383, 386–390, 397–405, Bucknell 2019: 395–414, and Bucknell 2022: 202–209.
- 13 The note serves to qualify the assessment of the pericope description of the second absorption in Griffiths 1983: 60, where “we find also the introduction of what appears to be a completely new factor—one-pointedness of mind (*cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ*).” In other words, its purpose appears to be to explain that, even though this “appears to be a completely new factor,” this is only a peculiarity of the pericope, as the factor under discussion is attributed to the first absorption in other Pāli discourses. The reference in his note to “partially reproduced on p. 6” is not clear to me, although this does not affect assessing the overall sense of his position.
- 14 The correlation is not entirely clear to me, as Bucknell 1993: 394 seems to relate goose-flesh to “*jhānas* 1 and 2,” which are the two absorptions in which *pīṭi/prīti* occurs, but his schematic survey in Bucknell 1993: 396 relates the stage of goose-flesh only to “*jhāna* 2.”

- 15 To be precise, Bucknell 1993: 394n33 actually refers to p. 21 of the original 1971 edition. Since in the 1991 reprint available to me the quote is not found on p. 21 but instead on p. 28, I take it that the pagination of this reprint has been changed.
- 16 Vism 143,16 lists: *khuddikā pīti*, *khaṇikā pīti*, *okkantikā pīti*, *ubbegā pīti*, *pharanā pīti*.
- 17 Bucknell 1993: 394 comments that a reference to the experience of the hair of the body being raised “occurs not in his [i.e. Buddhaghosa’s] account of the sub-stages leading to *jhāna*, but rather in his description of *jhāna* itself.” Although a gloss on the first absorption is indeed the context of the reference in question, which concerns *khuddikā pīti* (see previous note), the actual presentation takes the form of a general overview of this mental quality, followed by indicating which of the five types distinguished in this overview is directly relevant to the main topic of absorption attainment. This is the fifth type, Vism 144,34; *pharanā pīti*, *ayaṃ imasmiṃ atthe adhippetā pīti ti*.
- 18 MN 128 at MN III 157,25, MĀ 72 at T I 536c27, and Up 5020 at D 4094 ju 276a2 or P 5595 *thu* 20a2. Cousins 1973: 119 considers the (Pāli version of the) present passage to be an antecedent to the commentarial usage of the term *nimitta*, used to designate precisely a stage in concentration eventually leading to the attainment of the first absorption.
- 19 Vism 125,18.
- 20 Bucknell 1993: 387 is aware of this, as in his summary of the *Visuddhimagga* account he reports that, once the counterpart sign has arisen, “[t]he meditator now focuses on this counterpart sign, seeking to ‘extend’ it progressively.”
- 21 MN 102 at MN II 231,17 and its Tibetan parallel in Skilling 1994: 326,11.
- 22 This can be seen in the reasoning in Bucknell 1993: 389 that “Buddhaghosa’s account is in conflict with the Nikāya account; because, as the Stuart-Fox study makes clear, the *jhāna* 1 of the Nikāya account is a rather preliminary stage in which mental onepointedness has not yet been established.”
- 23 On this contrast see Anālayo 2022a: 185f.
- 24 See in more detail Anālayo 2016 (in reply to Arbel 2015) and Anālayo 2022a: 189–197.
- 25 Bucknell 2022: 262; the formulations occur as part of an anticipation regarding what other scholars “are most likely to take issue with.”
- 26 Paṭis I 166,31: *atītānudhāvanam cittam vikkhepānupatitam*.
- 27 SN 12.61 at SN II 95,5 and its parallels in a Sanskrit fragment, Chung and Fukita 2020: 114, and SĀ 289 at T II 81c15 (repeated in SĀ 290); see also EĀ 9.3 at T II 562c4 (repeated in EĀ 9.4).
- 28 Revealing in this respect is the discussion of retracing in Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: 53 and 54, who note “a major difficulty inherent in the retracing procedure, namely a tendency for a new thought sequence to begin before the original one has been retraced all the way to its source.” Yet, the supposed advantages of retracing thoughts in this way are such as to even stimulate the recommendation that a “meditator who has become proficient in concentration and wishes to move on to retracing may even find it necessary to stimulate the arising of thoughts.”
- 29 Vibh 144,2 and T 1545 at T XXVII 118c7; see also Anālayo 2018: 8f.
- 30 The reference given in Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1983b: 111n10 to “*Abhidharmakośa* vii 123” does not seem to be correct; the seventh chapter only reaches up to 56d. The relevant passage occurs in Abhidh-k VII 44a, Pradhan 1967: 422,7: *pūrvanivāsaṃ samanusrmartukāmaḥ samanantarāniruddhamanovijñāno nimittamudgrhya tatsamanantara-pratīlomyenāvasthāntarāṇi manasikaroti yāvat saṃdhicittam*.
- 31 The main argument in Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1983a appears to be that, in view of the difficulties of making sense of some of the descriptions of meditation practices in the early discourses (especially the three higher knowledges), the statement in DN 16 at DN II 100,2 (for parallels see Waldschmidt 1950: 196 and DĀ 2 at T I 15b1) that the Buddha had not held back any teachings needs to be qualified, keeping in mind that as a good teacher he would only give advanced teachings to those able to comprehend them. Although the discourses do indeed show the Buddha adjusting to his audiences, teachings that are quite specific and thus only really relevant to (or even intelligible by) rather advanced disciples can be found among the early discourses. In other words, there is no basis for assuming

that such specific teachings were not included among the texts memorized by the reciters. The need to make succinct indications intelligible to different audiences during subsequent instances of recitation in turn led to the gradual growth of a commentarial tradition, which was also committed to memory. Access to this body of explanations of the discourses, believed to have been spoken by the Buddha, would presumably have just required the ability and dedication necessary to memorize them, without any indication that some such information was confined to elite meditators. Since none of this naturally suggests the existence of an esoteric transmission during the period of early Buddhism, this idea may rather reflect the perceived needs of the authors, evident in the reasoning in Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: 60 that the “lack of explicit textual references to retracing is hard to reconcile with the demonstrable value of the practice as a means to insight. It raises the question whether retracing was perhaps taught and practised within the elite meditative tradition.” This type of reasoning appears to be responsible for envisioning the existence of an esoteric transmission. The same trajectory is evident in the attempt in Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: 155–179 to show that the practice of retracing is echoed in central doctrinal categories, in the sense of being symbolically referred to, a deeper meaning that those initiated into the esoteric transmission would presumably have readily understood. For the sake of completeness of coverage, I briefly note selected problems with the most important of these proposed correlations. Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: 157 propose that to “become a stream-enterer was to say that he had advanced in his practice to the stage of retracing,” higher levels of awakening then corresponding to ‘linking,’ etc. Hence, the term ‘stream-enterer’ “is appropriate since the corresponding stage in the insight practice consists in tracing the thought-stream back to its source.” Now, the first reported attainment of stream-entry happened during what tradition reckons to have been the first sermon of the Buddha (SN 46.11 at SN V 423,14; on the parallels see Anālayo 2012 and 2013). This stream-entry clearly features as the outcome of receiving a teaching on the four noble truths, rather than involving some form of initiation into the practice of retracing. In fact, the ‘stream’ entered at this point is the noble eightfold path (SN 55.5 at SN V 347,26 and SĀ 843 at T II 215b18). Regarding the four noble truths, the third truth is not just about “coming to see [mental] images in their true nature,” as assumed by Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: 167; it is also incorrect to identify the fourth truth as the “way to attain this by following the ‘Noble Tenfold Path’.” The tenfold path refers to the accomplishment of arahants/arhats (MN 117 at MN III 76, MĀ 189 at T I 736b20, Up 6080 at D 4094 *nyu* 46b4 or P 5595 *thu* 86b1, and the partially preserved SHT V 1125R3, Sander and Waldschmidt 1985: 120); the path of practice to become an arahant/arhat is the eightfold path. This also undermines the reasoning by Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: 179 that “Gotama would not have dealt with the techniques of insight meditation in his public discourses but would have imparted them to individual students in private. The Eightfold Path was familiar to all disciples; the secrets of the Tenfold Path were known only to the *ariyas*” (the last term in its usage by Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: 157 has come to carry the following sense: “an *ariya* was any disciple who was practising, or had already mastered” the insight meditation techniques of retracing, linking, etc.). Accordingly, the final goal of practice in the form of a total transformation of the mind with full awakening, resulting in, among other things, the ending of thought-proliferations (Dhp 254 and Uv 29.38), according to Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986: 194 involves “no radical transformation ... the thought-stream continues flowing as usual, its content as trivial and mundane as it was before the meditator embarked on his practice. The only difference is that ... the meditator has unbroken insight into the true nature of the thought-stream, an unobscured view into the cluttered junk-shop that is his own consciousness.” Although more such problems could be identified, the above should suffice for the present context to provide a general idea of the unreliability of the proposed correlations.

- 32 Bucknell 2022: 252 is aware of the problem of “allowing my interpretation of doctrine to be influenced by preconceptions about what the doctrines ought to be saying” but believes to have taken care of this issue by presenting the account of his personal meditation experiences at the end of the book rather than at its outset, as in this way it “can serve as

evidence to confirm or disconfirm prior doctrinal interpretation. This I see as the proper analytical approach.”

- 33 The reference is to MN 43. Yet, its reference to unification of the mind receives support from non-Pāli discourses and would thus have to be reckoned as part of early Buddhism; see above notes 5 and 7. MN 43 at MN I 294,³⁵ also lists the five hindrances as five factors that are left behind with the attainment of the first absorption, an indication not found in the relevant Chinese and Tibetan discourses and for this reason probably a later development specific to the Pāli tradition. However, in terms of content this indication is fully in line with a recurrent contrast made in the early discourses between the five hindrances and absorption attainment—note that the presentation in MN 43 does not involve a one-to-one correlation between a hindrance and an absorption factor but only mentions the two groups of five one after the other—so that this is also not an innovation of the type that involves a departure from early Buddhist thought.
- 34 The quotes are from Bucknell 2022: 252 and Cousins 2022: 34 respectively, taken up more fully at the outset of the present article.